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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001919

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER REVEALS "PLAN C" IF  
SLEIMAN NOT ELECTED

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Classified By: A/DCM Raouf Youssef for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY

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11. (C) Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr believes the opposition's efforts to reach a "package" deal on Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman's presidency will delay the election until next week. Murr agrees that such a package weakened the role of the president and, by implicitly suggesting a lack of trust in Sleiman, insulted the army. His discussions with Sleiman suggested the Commander was not interested in catering to Damascus and was warming up to the U.S. Hizballah and Aoun continued to create obstacles, though Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri claimed to have received a green light from Damascus to move forward. If, however, the election is not held by early next week, Murr revealed that majority leader Saad Hariri intended to begin a televised parliamentary sit-in to increase the pressure. End summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr at his home on December 4. Despite strong international pressure from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the U.S., the Patriarch, the Vatican (which was exerting very tough pressure through Papal Nuncio Gatti), and even Syria, Murr was "not optimistic" that Sleiman would be elected during the next scheduled parliamentary session (December 7). He claimed that, contrary to rumors that France and Syria had made a deal on a political package, his information was that French President Sarkozy had told Syrian President Asad that he should push to allow Sleiman's election to happen. Receiving a telephone readout during the meeting of the Secretary's December 4 phone conversation with French FM Kouchner, the Ambassador confirmed to Murr that Kouchner promised no deals.

NO TO PRESIDENTIAL PACKAGE

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13. (C) The Ambassador stressed that the U.S. was adamantly opposed to the opposition's efforts to link the presidency to a package deal on the next prime minister, cabinet formation and program, and military appointments. Parliament should vote on a president now. The opposition's blocking Sleiman's

election by insisting on prior commitments was an insult to the General. Depriving him of his voice in cabinet formation by serving him a fait accompli risked weakening his presidential powers. There should be no package deal on his presidency, he said, adding that the U.S. was not asking Sleiman for any commitments.

¶4. (C) Murr agreed, suggesting that a "more interesting headline" would be to accuse the opposition publicly of humiliating the army as a whole. He had told Sleiman this earlier in the day, and he himself intended to make such a statement by the end of the week if it appeared there was no hope for a quick election for Sleiman.

#### SLEIMAN SNUBS SYRIA

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¶5. (C) Murr said Sleiman admitted to him that, in the past, he had suspected a U.S. "allergy" to the opposition, but that, after "rewinding," he realized that what they were doing was really poor (NFI). The Ambassador noted that the people Sleiman was suspicious of in the past, i.e., March 14, were the ones who nominated him for president, whereas the ones he trusted, i.e., the opposition, had not. Sleiman could have been president last week, had the opposition not created obstacles.

¶6. (C) The Syrians reportedly had already sent Sleiman a message saying his first foreign visit should be to Damascus, Murr continued. Sleiman's response to Murr was that his first stop would be the Vatican, followed by the EU (Brussels), the U.S., and then non-stop from there to Damascus, sending a strong signal to the Syrians.

¶7. (C) Murr (expecting to remain Minister of Defense) said he told Sleiman that he would work on a security strategy with the U.S. and the international community before creating the

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next military council. Sleiman reportedly gave him a green light on security issues, telling him, "this is your issue, go as far as you want, don't ask me anything."

#### HIZBALLAH DISTRUSTS SLEIMAN

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¶8. (C) Murr said Hizballah was vying for a package deal because it did not trust Sleiman to look after its interests. According to his Hizballah contacts, they would insist on including Aoun in the package and a blocking minority in the cabinet; they would not accept anything less or they would block the process, Murr reported.

¶9. (C) Hizballah considers Sleiman to be "extreme March 14," Murr continued. He had told Sleiman that, just as the Patriarch had bared his teeth (i.e., by issuing a strong statement on November 30 criticizing Berri for not convening parliament), it was time for him to show his, representing the army, to Hizballah. The LAF Commander should send a message to Hizballah saying it was not just blocking a candidate, it was blocking the entire army.

#### NO BAZAAR WITH AOUN

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¶10. (C) Murr predicted that Aoun also dismissed any possibility of an Aoun-Sleiman alliance; Sleiman was "praying" that Aoun would send its people into the streets so he could take action, Murr claimed. (Note: Aoun, who was responsible for delaying Sleiman's promotion when Aoun was LAF Commander, met with Sleiman on December 3, and reportedly told him that "the greatest joy for a father is that his son obtains what the father wanted for himself." End note.) Sleiman's election would be a huge blow to Aoun, Murr continued, and Hizballah will abandon him when he starts losing. Then, "we'll erase him in 2009," he said, referring to the next legislative elections.

BERRI GETS GREEN LIGHT?

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¶11. (C) Berri, Murr said, was waiting for a green light from Damascus. Noting that it would to the Muslims' detriment to have Christmas come without a president, Murr argued that Berri could not delay much longer without invoking the wrath of the Christians. According to his father, Aoun bloc MP Michel Murr, who had recently met with the Speaker, Berri claimed to have received the green light, but wanted to arrange a Hariri-Aoun "photo op" to demonstrate to the Syrians that he had done everything possible to bring Aoun on board. Then Berri would fix the election date for Tuesday, December 11, claiming his MPs would vote for Sleiman even if Hizballah and Aoun were opposed. March 14, Murr said, was already was preparing a petition from ten MPs to begin the amendment process, hoping to present the petition at 11:00 am, have parliament vote on it, print it in the official journal, than hold the election by 5:00 pm, all the same day.

PLAN C: SAAD GOES GHANDI

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¶12. (C) If, however, the opposition continued to delay the process and Berri postponed the election until a later date, Murr (please protect) revealed that Saad already had a "Plan C": beginning as early as December 8, March 14 parliamentarians would move to the parliamentary hall and stay there, with live television coverage, until the election is held. Murr said his father also would send some of his MPs. This would create "huge pressure" on Berri to convene parliament, he smiled, adding that Saad was doing a "Ghandi." A wealthy Ghandi, the Ambassador noted.

¶13. (C) Regarding security for the MPs, many of whom have been living in tightly controlled hotel rooms for the past two and a half months, Murr said he would put commandos all around the perimeter and inside parliament to protect them. (Note: The 40-odd MPs living at the Phoenicia Hotel in downtown Beirut moved to La Hoya Suites on November 30 to allow the Phoenicia to accommodate wedding guests with prior reservations for December. End note.)

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COMMENT

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¶14. (C) Keeping in mind that Murr's information on Berri's intentions (assuming Berri himself was speaking honestly) is third-hand, if Berri does indeed have the green light from Damascus, we could see Sleiman elected less than a week from now. A week, however, is an eternity in Lebanese politics. FM Kouchner's current visit to Beirut, Berri's as-of-yet unveiled proposal for amending the constitution, the monthly Maronite Bishops' statement (expected December 5), unforeseen new initiatives from Aoun, and never-ending behind-the-scenes negotiations, not to mention the possibility of a parliamentary sit-in -- these are all factors that will play into the developments over the next few days. Meanwhile, most here agree that there will not be an election on December 7. End comment.  
FELTMAN